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ABSTRACT

Throughout its history, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has addressed the question: How can literature be fully revealed to students at all educational levels? In answering this question, NCTE has (1) clarified the rationale and objectives for teaching literature, with a view to reconciling concepts of literature as both an intellectual discipline and an avenue to personal and social understanding; (2) directed literature study toward individual transactions with texts, and studied the patterns of these transactions or responses; (3) combatted censorship and clarified issues and assumptions underlying attempts at censorship; and (4) defined and prompted the role of children's and adolescent literature in the curriculum. Historically concerned with the education of the imagination, NCTE is now advocating balance in a "back-to-basics" era. In the future, it will work toward maintaining a prominent place for literature at all levels of education as an indispensable way to esthetic experiences and to vicarious knowledge of the human condition. (HTH)

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THE NCTE AND THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

Dwight L. Burton

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THE NCTE AND THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

To discuss the role and influence of the NCTE in the teaching of literature, or any other aspect of the English curriculum, is to acknowledge that in this large organization the range of philosophies and of attitudes toward teaching strategies represent as broad a spectrum as that in the entire English teaching world.

The generalizations that I bring are based mostly on publications of the Council and on statements and activities of people and agencies within the organization. The Council has provided a broad forum, giving opportunities for viewing the teaching of literature from as many coigns of vantage as many brilliant minds could furnish. I find in one of our publications, THE TEACHING AND AMERICAN LITERATURE of 1965, a statement by the editor, Lewis Leary, that I think provides the fundamental basis for any generalizations about the NCTE and the teaching of literature: "For literature when fully revealed is perhaps also the most seminal and important element in the educative process" (p. vi). This statement is, first, the essence of a global philosophy of many NCTE members over the years. But, secondly, there are a few words within Leary's statement which are especially indicative of the problems and issues with which the Council has been concerned, and those words are, "literature when fully revealed." How literature is to be fully revealed in the experiences of students at all educational levels is the basic question which the Council has addressed in its decades of history.

In doing so, the Council has made its major contributions, it seems to me, to the teaching of literature on four fronts:

1. Attempting to clarify the rationale and objectives for teaching literature, with a view to reconciling concepts of literature as an intellectual discipline and as an avenue to personal and social

understandings.

2. Directing literature study toward individual transactions with texts and studying the patterns of those transactions or responses.
3. Combating censorship and clarifying issues and assumptions underlying attempts at censorship.
4. Promoting and clarifying the role of literature for children and adolescents.

Concerning rationale and objectives, the first curriculum volumes of the Council, published in the 1930's -- An Experience Curriculum in English (1935), A Correlated Curriculum in English (1936), Conducting Experiences in English, (1939) — revealed a clear bias for the personal and social functions of literature. In A Correlated Curriculum, for example, is this statement: "The point of view is the acceptance of the subject as a means to a personal growth, to adjustment to life, and to social reconstruction rather than as an end in itself" (p. 229). The "experience" philosophy of the time was linked to the interest in the response of the individual to literature, which was to burgeon later and hark back to the work of the thirties by I.A. Richards (1) and Louise Rosenblatt (2), though their books were not publications of the Council.

The NCTE journals of the decade, especially the English Journal for the secondary level, reflected a controversy over "intensive" versus "extensive" reading of literature, some facets of which were to surface in a new context thirty years later, and in an article in the English Journal in 1932, Helene Hartley, later a president of the NCTE, proposed a "Via Media," as she phrased it, through which major outcomes of both approaches could be achieved (3).

With the coming of World War II at the outset of the 1940's the relating of education to what America was fighting for naturally caused social functions of literature to be emphasized, and the volume Basic Aims of English

Instruction of 1942 listed "the development of social understanding through literature" as one of the basic aims. It was in this decade that the "thematic unit," building English instruction around a topic or theme in social or personal or cultural problems, because relatively widespread, and the journals frequently featured accounts of such units from enthusastic teachers.

The Council's curriculum volumes of the 1950's, a general volume and one for each level of the educational ladder, were solidly oriented to the concept of literature as the avenue to insight into personal and social experience, though these volumes were more controversial apparently than those of the depression-era 1930's. In the secondary school volume, for example, the prototype teaching unit in literature was "Back Country America," pointing students' attention to American cultural groups out of the mainstream.

But sands definitely were shifting by the end of the decade of the fifties with the Sputnik landmark and the coming of the Basic Issues conferences, ushering in a new, more academic approach to the teaching of literature. By 1965, in the monograph on teaching American literature which I cited earlier, Willard Thorp was saying that teaching literature had undergone a "revolution" through "one fundamental and radical change: the study in depth of the work we have at hand." (p. 3). In the same year, the Council published Scholarly Appraisals of Literary Works Taught in High Schools, edited by Stephen Dunning, which gave teachers some models for close reading.

In spite of such statements and publications, schools and colleges did not necessarily go to close reading, and in a 1967 pamplet of the Council's Commission on Literature, the author, poet William Stafford, lamented that "at this stage of discussion among members of the profession, it is probably impossible to sort out the strands of our confusion" (4). In their well-known

national study of high school English programs, 1968, James Squire and Roger Applebee found no consensus on rationale for the teaching of English, but they recommended that "Successful and exciting teaching of literature is most likely to take place when works are approached through close reading and modern critical methods" and that historical and biographical approaches lead often to "erosion of literary study" (5).

The catharsis of the Darthmouth conference and the resulting publications came in the 60's, an unsettling stimulus to some such as Stanley Kegler who in a speech at a conventions warned of the "Redcoats coming again", referring to some unexpected ideas from the British contingent, but there were changing currents of thought, a relaxing of the insistence on close reading and renewed concern with individual response. Arthur Applebee, in his history published in 1974, concluded however, that "teachers of literature have never successfully resisted the pressure to formulate their subject as a body of knowledge to be imparted" (6). That pressure came largely from local curriculum committees and producers of textbook-anthologies rather than from the NCTE. But even at the college level, for example, Barrett Mandel, in his monograph of 1970, Literature and the English Department, shook the cages of his compeers with "...we have become bogged down in a non-humanistic professionalism, static pedagogy, and a destructive cultural snobbism. My belief is that we can change all this, and make the study of literature into the stimulating, meaningful experience it should be. (p. vii).

Still the continued yearning for the proper reconciliation of rationales in the teaching of literature is rather wistfully echoed in a statement of 1977 by Robert Bennett, then Chair of the NCTE Committee on Redefining English: "Our purposes for teaching literature need to be reaffirmed and reexamined. The area of response to literature deserves study and explication as we discuss developing literary sensitivity and appreciation. The role of

literary analysis needs clarification." (7).

Some of Bennett's hope were met in the 1980 publication, Teaching the Art of Literature by Bruce Miller, who defines literary analysis as proceeding from three sets of stimuli: "an interior happening to experience, a palpable thing to observe, and a significance to ponder." (p. 45). His placing of an interior happening first in the hierarchy gives a lead into the major conclusion I am going to come to about the role of the NCTE in promoting and understanding individual reader response to literature.

Several of the early research monographs of the Council are on reader response. Those by Squire of 1964 (8) and by Alan Purves and Victoria Rippere of 1968 (9), categorizing the responses of students, have furnished part of the design base for numerous later studies. Purves and Richard Beach, in the 1972 literature and the Reader, brought together for the first time a review of research on response to literature, recommending in their conclusions that research be accelerated concerning the various aspects of response--cognition, perception, emotional or attitudinal reaction, predispositions--and the results of response. To a heartening degree, reports in Research in the Teaching of English during the past few years indicate that researchers are responding to the challenge.

What seems at this point to be the fundamental consensus on the role of individual response to literature in the entire literary experience, as expressed in Rosenblatt's seminal Literature As Exploration, David Bleich's Readings and Feelings, 1975, and Miller's Teaching the Art of Literature, is that initial viscerally subjective response is the basis for anything that follows in criticism or close reading.

One of the most directly influential services of the Council, and one of the most gratefully received by the schools, is the combating of censorship

and the clarifying of the complex issues associated with it. The journal editors diligently have informed readers on censorship problems and published articles which have clarified assumptions underlying censorships attempts, particularly those relating to the influence of literature on behavior--physical, emotional, and intellectual. The Students Right to Read, 1982 revision, has been especially influential, presenting a well-reasoned defense of a basic freedom as well as some practical guidelines for schools to follow in dealing with censorship problems. Dealing With Censorship, 1979, edited by James Davis, has served as a welcome compendium of information on various aspects of censorship, and the unique pamphlet, Obscenity, the Law, and the English Teacher, 1966, by Robert Hogan and John Frank, was a ray of enlightenment to many teachers and administrators. I feel sure, without sentimentality, that many teachers feel sheltered by the vigilance of the Council in the problem of censorship.

One of the more significant roles two of the Council, I think, has been in the field of literature for children and adolescents. Assembles on children's literature and on adolescent literature have been formed within the Council in the past few years, each assembly now with hundreds of members and each with its own journal. The "new realism" of the last fifteen years in literature for children and adolescents, signalling the exorcism of old taboos and conventions in substance, form, and language, brought some of the problems of censorship, but the major problem addressed by the Council in children's literature has been the informing of teachers. Two publications of the late 1960's were significant in laying a data base for building programs--Teaching Children's Literature in Colleges and Universities, (1968), edited by Elliott Landau, and the NCTE-ERIC report by Norine Odland, Teaching Literature in the Elementary School, 1969. "One resource unequaled in value for accomplishing goals in early childhood programs is literature" is the opening pronouncement

in Literature and Young Children, 1977, edited by Bernice Cullinan and Carolyn Carmichael, a publication aimed at pre-school and primary grade teachers. Useful to teachers have been the recommendations concluding Ellen Terry's research monograph of 1976, Children's Poetry Preferences, and the practical material in Using Literature in the Elementary Classroom, 1978, edited by John Stewig and Sam Sebesta. The prominence given study and teaching of children's literature by the Council has elevated the level of research in the field, witness for example the research monograph by Andre Favat, Child and Tale, 1977, which studies the linkage of interest in fairy tales with developmental stages of children.

More controversy has surrounded literature for adolescents than has been aroused with children's literature. The English Journal records a long debate over the value of literature for adolescents in the the school curriculum. Eyebrows raised when in 1951, the editor of the Journal, W. Wilbur Hatfield, published as the lead article a critical look at novels for the adolescent in place of the usual lead piece on established writes (10). Books that students choose to read themselves and understand and enjoy without help from teachers are of no value in the literature program of the school has been one side in the debate, while the other has been that such books have a vital transition function in preparing for more mature literary experiences. The debate continues in the October 1982 issue of the English Journal with another defense of the value of young adult novels in the school program (11).

Well, we have come to this storied city to reflect on our theme, "Let the Best of the Past Inform the Future." If study of our past history helps us to understand the present and predict the future, we can understand the present role of the Council in advocating balance in a back-to-basics era. James Miller tells us in the new Council publication, The English Curriculum Under

Fire: What are the Real Basics?, that "the aims of English may be summarized as the education of the imagination", in which literature must have a vital place (12). And we can predict that in the future, Council influence will be toward maintaining a prominent place for revealing literature in its fullness at all levels of education as an indispensable way to esthetic experience and to felt knowledge of the human condition.

--Dwight L. Burton
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NOTES

1. Practical Criticism: A Study in Literary Judgement (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1930).

2. Literature As Exploration (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts 1938).

3. "A Via Media in the Teaching of Literature," English Journal, XXI (April, 1932), pp. 295-298.

4. Friends to This Ground, p. 19.

5. High School English Instruction Today, p. 251.

6. Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History, p. 245.

7. "Toward a Redefinition of English," Focus: Teaching English Language Arts (Athens, Ohio: Southeastern Ohio Council of Teachers of English, Fall, 1977), p. 4.

8. The Responses of Adolescents While Reading Four Short Stories, NCTE Research Report No. 2, 1964.

9. Elements of Writing About a Literary Work, NCTE Research Report No. 9, 1968.

10. Dwight L. Burton, "The Novel for the Adolescent," English Journal, 71 40 (September, 1951), pp. 363-369.

11. John A. Davis, "Adolescent Literature: A Bridesmaid Once Again," English Journal, 71 (October, 1982), pp. 77-79.

12. "The Basics and the Imagination," The English Curriculum Under Fire: What Are the Real Basics?, George Hillocks, ed., p. 66.

DLB/ag/NCTE